

Steering Students Toward Legal Careers



BY CHRISTINE STUTZ

As a law student, Rob Bokman '97 was drawn to public interest law, but he was reluctant to pursue it as a career because he believed all the stereotypes about long hours and low pay. It was during a visit to the campus Career Development Office that Bokman learned it is possible to make a decent living in public interest law.

Today, Bokman is a child advocacy lawyer in the Metropolitan Maryland Office of the Legal Aid Bureau in Riverdale. And if it hadn't been for the advice he received in the Career Development Office, he says, he might not have found the job he loves.

"Teresa Schmiedeler was really helpful," Bokman says. The law school's Director of Career Development, Judicial Clerkships and Public Interest programs sold him on public-interest law as a great way to gain hands-on legal experience, and she told him he could make a decent living at it. "She convinced me that it was possible," he says.

To help him prepare for job interviews, Schmiedeler gave him useful feedback about what prospective employers

would find most attractive about his credentials. "She pointed out my strengths—qualities attractive to employers to focus on during an interview," he says.

After passing the bar in fall 1997, Bokman took a position with a small general practice firm in Baltimore, but he quickly realized it was not the job for him, and he resigned.

Schmiedeler invited him to come to the office's public interest law career fair, where he met the attorney who later hired him.

Beginning in the students' first year at the University, the Career Development Office helps them plan for their law careers, says Dana Morris, Assistant Dean for Career Development. That preparation can involve seeking law-related summer jobs and internships, choosing courses to develop an area of interest, and becoming comfortable with the interview process, she says.

Good news for current students and recent graduates is that the job market for lawyers, which experienced a downturn in the early 1990s, has rebounded in the past three years, Morris says. Of the 265 graduates of the Class of 1998, 95 percent have reported employment, are in degree programs, or are not seeking employment. "Our graduates are not only finding jobs, they're finding them a little sooner than they have in years past," she says. While it used to take a good six months for the lion's share of graduates to secure law-related

jobs, she says, high percentages are finding employment earlier.

Earlier in the decade, responding to instability in the economy, many law firms cut back on their hiring, Morris says. As the economy has improved in the latter half of the decade, she says, it has generated more work for lawyers, prompting firms to hire more recent graduates.

The hiring surge was reflected in last fall's Washington Interviewing Program, a new program coordinated with the Villanova University School of Law. Some 28 Washington, D.C. employers attended the event—a significant expansion of the law school's fall recruitment effort—at the St. James Hotel; 14 of these firms interviewed 150 students, says Morris. Some of those employers were new to the University of Maryland School of Law's interviewing program. "We've also seen an increase in the number of our job listings," she says.

Schmiedeler says she has been pleased at the increase in the number of judicial clerkships obtained by recent graduates. In the 1997 graduating class, she says, 17 percent, or 37 students, were offered clerkships. Almost one-quarter of the 1998 graduating class, or 54 students, received clerkships, she notes.

"All employers value that experience. It's probably the best experience a recent graduate could have," says Schmiedeler, citing the lasting bond between judges and their clerks as one of

the main benefits of a clerkship.

One of the goals of the new Career Development team, Morris says, was to "broaden the geographical scope of employment opportunities for students and encourage more students to consider those opportunities." An indicator of employees' interest in Maryland students, she says, has been the increased number of out-of-state firms that have asked the office to collect student resumes for them.

This past fall, the Career Development Office hosted the National Association for Public Interest Law (NAPIL) Conference, the largest of its kind in the national public interest community, at the University's College Park campus on Nov. 6 and 7 (see story next page). It was the first time the School of Law hosted the conference, which previously had been hosted by American University's Washington College of Law.

More than 1,000 students from law schools across the country attended the conference and career fair, in which 200 national public interest employers participated. Speakers included Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. "The NAPIL Conference and the Washington Interviewing Program were high points in a very successful year for the Career Development Office," says José Bahamonde-González, Assistant Dean of Administration and formerly Assistant Dean for Career Development.